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STATE FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR
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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM PTER LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PRO-SYRIANS SEE ADVANTAGES TO
PERPETUATING STATUS QUO

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (S) Selim Jeressaiti, Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's legal advisor, reported that LAF Commander Michel Sleiman remains the presidential candidate of choice for Hizballah and Syria. While expressing his own hope that a genuine consensus candidate would emerge instead, Jeressaiti argued that Syria and Hizballah will simply wait until they can impose Sleiman on Lebanon. The best way to do so might be to preserve the status quo -- PM Siniora in the Grand Serail, Emile Lahoud in Baabda Palace -- well beyond the November 24 expiration of Lahoud's presidential term. Over the next months, the March 14 majority might vanish under bribery, public discontent, intimidation, defections, and assassinations. At the point they gain the parliamentary majority, Hizballah and Syria can dictate not only the next president but also the next prime minister and cabinet majority.

¶12. (S) The two downsides for Syria of this scenario, Jeressaiti acknowledged, are the perpetuation of the hated Siniora cabinet and, more serious, the danger that the Special Tribunal for Lebanon will be up and running before the March 14 majority is definitively destroyed. Asked what would happen if March 14 uses the 'half-plus-one' scenario to elect a president now and pre-empt the "status quo" option, Jeressaiti said that Lahoud would leave Baabda Palace without appointing a second cabinet (choosing to turn over his presidential powers to a military council instead), but Hizballah, Michel Aoun, and other pro-Syrians would seize the initiative on the street. Chaos would prevail, through which, again, Michel Sleiman would emerge as a potential savior. But Jeressaiti did not believe that March 14 could actually muster an absolute majority vote in parliament, given the clear costs to Lebanon's stability. End summary.

LAF COMMANDER SLEIMAN: STILL
THE TOP CHOICE OF SYRIA, HIZBALLAH

¶13. (S) The Ambassador met with Selim Jeressaiti, Emile Lahoud's legal advisor, for two hours on 10/12 to explore Lahoud's thinking (as relayed by Jeressaiti) regarding upcoming presidential elections. Claiming that Lahoud himself strongly disagrees with the choice, Jeressaiti said that Syria and Hizballah remain committed to seeing Lebanese

Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman installed as president, followed by current Military Intelligence (G-2) chief Georges Khoury replacing Sleiman at the head of the LAF. Jeressaiti described Khoury as "100 percent Syrian," but he was more charitable about Sleiman: Sleiman is not a Syrian agent, but he's pliant. Desirous of being president and knowing that March 14 leaders will not support him (something Walid Jumblatt told him directly over dinner recently), Sleiman is susceptible to the Syrian and Hizballah wooing. Promising to support his presidential bid, Hizballah has acquired from Sleiman a commitment not to crack down on weapons smuggling or Hizballah's arms.

SLIM HOPE FOR CONSENSUS ALTERNATIVE

¶4. (S) Emphasizing that he agrees with March 14 leaders ("some of my best friends are from March 14") that Sleiman is the wrong choice for Lebanon, Jeressaiti said that there is still very slim hope for a genuine consensus around candidates like Michel Edde, Shakib Qortbawi (a lawyer), MP Robert Ghanem, or even March 14 candidate Boutros Harb. Jeressaiti expressed his own preference for Harb and said that he thought he could get Emile Lahoud (whose personal priority, Jeressaiti confirmed, is to block his ex-friend Charles Rizk and his hated cousin Nassib Lahoud from the presidency) to refrain from trying to impose a Syrian veto of Harb. Harb's candidacy may be intriguing to Syria and Hizballah, given the frosty relations between Harb, on the one hand, and Hariri and Jumblatt, on the other.

¶5. (S) But Jeressaiti thought that, unless sufficient outside pressure was imposed on Syria and Iran to back off on Sleiman's candidacy, all the March 8 talk about genuine

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consensus is just "empty talk." Elaborating, Jeressaiti said that Iran itself has no candidate but is fully behind Hizballah's choice of Sleiman. Syria has views, Hizballah has views, but Iran follows Hizballah's lead in supporting Sleiman. So March 8 will try to convince March 14 that Sleiman is the consensus pick.

POSSIBLE OPTION: MAINTAIN STATUS QUO,
WITH BOTH LAHOUD AND SINIORA IN PLACE

¶6. (S) The Ambassador asked if Jeressaiti thought that March 14 could be sufficiently pressured into backing Sleiman; was the Syrian and Hizballah strategy realistic? Jeressaiti acknowledged that pushing through a constitutional amendment (required for Sleiman to become president) at this moment was an unlikely proposition, politically and technically. But, if March 8 fails in gaining March 14 acquiescence for Sleiman's presidency now, then March 8 is willing to wait. Jeressaiti said that he believes that Syria and Hizballah, in looking at all of the current options, believe that perpetuating the status quo is best. While March 8 and March 14 blocs will go through the motions of seeking a consensus president before the November 24 expiration of Lahoud's term, in fact neither side wants to concede. So, after November 24, the situation will be the same as today: PM Siniora will be in the Grand Serail, with his cabinet recognized by the world, and Emile Lahoud will stay in Baabda Palace.

SEEKING DUBIOUS JUSTIFICATIONS
BEHIND LAHOUD'S EXTENDED BAABDA STAY

¶7. (S) The Ambassador expressed surprise: in previous meetings, Jeressaiti had repeatedly insisted that Lahoud would leave office upon the end of his constitutional mandate, come what may. Acknowledging the change, Jeressaiti referred to what he said was a French legal concept about "continuation of public service" to prevent vacuum, an

unwritten constitutional principle that would apply in this case since Lahoud maintains that Siniora's cabinet, lacking Shia representation, does not exist. As there is no legal cabinet that could hold the presidential authorities in custody until elections, Lahoud is forced to stay. He would not appoint a second cabinet, but simply remain in place. Jeressaiti said that Lahoud would also get political cover by assembling a cross-confessional meeting of Lebanese notables who would demand that he remain in office, rather than turn over the powers of his office temporarily to the illegal Siniora cabinet. Jeressaiti accepted the Ambassador's point that such a gathering would be easy to pull off but have little political or constitutional credibility.

PURPOSE OF MAINTAINING STATUS QUO:
RELACE MARCH 14 MAJORITY WITH PRO-SYRIANS

¶8. (S) But with Lahoud remaining in office, Jeressaiti said, life in Lebanon would continue in a form similar to today: two separate blocs hovering around the Siniora cabinet and Lahoud's presidency. The army would not be forced to choose sides, and the security conditions would remain more or less as they are now, without hostile takeovers of GOL installations. The point, he explained, was to allow March 8-Aoun forces time to win the parliamentary majority. Over a period of weeks or months, March 14 will become weakened and splintered. The Syrians and Hizballah will use a variety of means, including bribes and threats, to win March 14 MPs to their side. Some March 14 MPs, when they realize that March 14 is unable to elect a president, will naturally, opportunistically, rush to be on the winning side. The Ambassador noted assassinations, which Jeressaiti agreed are also a likely possibility, particularly in districts (like Baabda-Aley) where by-elections would likely produce March 8-Aoun victors. Even if the status quo has to be maintained for two years (until summer 2009 parliamentary elections), it is better for Syria and Hizballah to wait then to permit a genuine consensus president to emerge now. For one thing, the current cabinet program (with its offensive "defense of the resistance" language) remains in place.

TO SYRIA, HIZBALLAH, SLEIMAN LATER

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IS PREFERABLE TO CONSENSUS NOW

¶9. (S) At the moment that the March 14 parliamentary majority has disappeared, then Hizballah and Syria can use the new pro-Syrian majority to impose Michel Sleiman "or even Suleiman Franjeh." As the Christians and particularly Maronite Patriarch Sfeir will have been distraught over the vacancy in the presidency, then a constitutional amendment becomes easier. And at that point, Hizballah and Syria, now controlling the parliamentary majority, will also be able to impose the next prime minister and cabinet majority. Why, Jeressaiti asked, would Hizballah and Syria accept a genuine consensus president now, when they can have a president of their choosing by waiting only a few months. The Ambassador noted that Jeressaiti's predictions assume solidarity between Hizballah and Michel Aoun, for, without the Aoun MPs on board, this does not work. Jeressaiti said that, with the trauma of the presidential vacancy upsetting their constituents, sufficient numbers of the Aoun MPs would join Hizballah and Nabih Berri to make this strategy succeed. Michel Aoun, "a crazy man," ultimately will not vote for Michel Sleiman. But he will certainly support the status quo for now, rather than allow a consensus or March 14 president to emerge.

BUT CALENDAR TO SWITCH MAJORITY
RUNS UP AGAINST TRIBUNAL PROGRESS

¶10. (S) Jeressaiti said that he envisioned two downsides

for Hizballah and Syria. First, Syria despises Fouad Siniora. The status quo scenario would permit Siniora to remain in office, playing a prominent role nationally and internationally. Second, and more alarming for Syria, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon might end up being up and running before the parliamentary majority is safely in Syria's hands. Syria and Hizballah will want to have the parliamentary majority change sides and a new president installed as a fait accompli before the Special Tribunal's actions weaken Syrian influence in Lebanon.

PRE-EMPTIVE MOVE BY MARCH 14 TO ELECT
A PRESIDENT BY ABSOLUTE MAJORITY: "UNLIKELY"

¶11. (S) The Ambassador noted that March 14 leaders, once aware of a March 8-Aoun strategy to perpetuate the status quo, might take pre-emptive action by electing a March 14 president with "half-plus-one" of the MPs. Jeressaiti thought the possibility of March 14 moving from threat to implementation was highly remote. March 14 will not have the 65 parliamentary votes needed, he said, as sufficient numbers of MPs, fearing the consequences of such a provocative act, will refuse to go along. Saudi Arabia, fearful of conflict inside Lebanon being added to regional woes, will advise Saad Hariri to refrain from such a step. Jeressaiti claimed that former Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who was recently in Saudi Arabia, secured King Abdullah's commitment to advise Hariri to dissociate his bloc from an absolute-majority vote. Tactically, Hariri will hold this out as an option; practically, he will never go along, because of Saudi orders, Jeressaiti said confidently.

WITH ABSOLUTE MAJORITY PRESIDENT, THEN CHAOS
-- AND SLEIMAN RETURNS AS LEADING CANDIDATE

¶12. (S) The Ambassador pressed Jeressaiti on what would happen if somehow March 14 does pull off an absolute majority presidential election. Emile Lahoud will indeed leave Baabda Palace as scheduled on November 24, Jeressaiti responded. But, even if the world recognizes the new president, Lahoud will not. He will not appoint a second, competing government or participate in creating a second president. But he will find some vehicle on which to bestow his presidential authorities. Jeressaiti thought that some kind of military council would be the likely recipient ad interim of the presidential powers.

¶13. (S) But the real problem will be on the ground, Jeressaiti said. A March 14 absolute majority president will be besieged and weakened immediately. Hizballah, using gangs

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of front men, Michel Aoun, Suleiman Franjeh, and others will immediately take over key installations around the country. "There is a plan ready for action," Jeressaiti insisted. Chaos and violence will prevail. Pausing for a moment, Jeressaiti mused that the chaos and violence might be short-lived, given how much more heavily armed the March 8-Aoun forces are compared to March 14. March 14 might be defeated quite quickly on the street. The LAF will not fight for the March 14 president, Jeressaiti predicted. In the midst of all of the problems an absolute majority election would cause, Michel Sleiman would once again become the leading presidential candidate. Sleiman would be seen as potential savior from chaos and violence.

PLAYING WITH, AND DISMISSING, OTHER OPTIONS

¶14. (S) The Ambassador asked if Jeressaiti saw any other options, noting that some have mused about having a prime minister that leans toward March 8 as the price to pay to allow a March 14 president to be elected. "Oh, the 'N and N' option," Jeressaiti laughed, with Nassib Lahoud as president

and Najib Mikati as prime minister. Who, Jeressaiti asked, would sell that idea to Saad Hariri. Jeressaiti said that his personal view was that the Nassib Lahoud and Najib Mikati would be perhaps the ideal pair to get Lebanon out of its current crisis. But Hizballah and Syria will never accept this compromise, he said. Jeressaiti asked about whether it might be possible to try again for a national unity cabinet, with Mikati as premier, with the idea that such a cabinet could fill the presidential vacuum with the approval of all parts of the country until a presidential solution emerges. The Ambassador said that he found it highly unlikely March 14 would agree to turn over the premiership to Mikati, in the absence of a credible president and clear guarantees about the cabinet composition and program.

COMMENT

¶15. (S) To borrow a commonly-used caveat from a sister agency, we would say that Jeressaiti hoped "to influence as well as to inform." It is safe to assume that Jeressaiti compared notes with Emile Lahoud about what to us. But we're a bit mystified by what he hopes we will do with this analysis: destroy Michel Sleiman's reputation? Or, alternatively, accept the inevitability of Sleiman as president? Push our March 14 allies extra hard for some kind of consensus (other than Sleiman) now, for fear that otherwise they will have Sleiman forced upon them later? Or did Jeressaiti simply wish to show off to us how clever and well-informed he is?

¶16. (S) Putting aside whatever his motivations might be, we have to say that Jeressaiti's tidy analysis about the "status quo" option sounds sensible in light of current political developments. March 8 leaders do seem to have two goals in mind -- to see Michel Sleiman elected as president, and to see the March 14 majority destroyed. (Michel Aoun shares the second goal only, of course, but is probably an unwitting participant in the first.) March 8 leaders change their tactics on how to reach those goals, but the goals remain constant. In today's political conditions, maintaining the status quo indefinitely holds out the possibility of achieving both. A status quo option also frustrates our ability to use the Executive Orders and visa ban tools. While we could decide to designate Emile Lahoud for remaining in office beyond the constitutional deadline of November 24, there is no second cabinet against which to take punitive action.

¶17. (S) If Jeressaiti's description is accurate, then, the status quo option is a diabolically clever tactical plan (which makes us wonder again why the always genial Jeressaiti revealed it to us). Of course, as Jeressaiti also noted, an absolute majority vote to elect a president (March 14's alleged trump card) could also inadvertently contribute to the achievement of the March 8 dual goals: if March 14 is seen publicly here as having taken an unconstitutional step that unleashes chaos and violence, then March 14's public support drops (with MPs surely switching sides) and Michel Sleiman can appear to be the one person who could stop the violence. The status quo option described by Jeressaiti may

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become outdated or superseded by unforeseen developments in the near future. But, for now, we recommend taking this idea seriously.

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